

HMS. VICTORIOUS AND THE WAR BRIDES.

It is about time that I told you about a little known part of Australian History that happened just after the War in 1946.

The War was over and Australia and the World were starting again and looking forward to Peace. We were welcoming our troops back home and our Government was preparing to see that our returning young men and women would not have to suffer the horrors of another Great Depression.

There were plans to provide education and training to all who wanted it. Jobs must be there and new industries must be started to provide a bright future for everyone.

There was confidence in our Government which was now led by Ben Chifley and we were saddened by the death of our great Wartime Leader, John Curtin.

One big problem was what to do with 15,000 young Australian Women who had met and married the servicemen from the USA, Canada, Holland and the UK, who had been stationed in Australia. Some of these women had not seen their husbands for two years and they were now demanding that something be done.

As there was a great shortage of passenger ships and the Airlines were only just starting to get their act together, there had to be some way to get these women and their husbands together.

The Royal Navy came up with a solution.

Use the many Aircraft Carriers which were going to be scrapped anyway.

A story that must be told.

On the 5 June 1946, *HMS Victorious*, the huge British Aircraft Carrier, sailed through Sydney Heads into Port Jackson. It was a grand sight.

Victorious had been part of the *British Fleet Task Force 57* which had been in the Pacific area since the War in Europe had ended. This Force had four other Carriers, *Indomitable, Illustrious, Indefatigable and Formidable*. They were part of the huge Allied Fleet which had been bombarding the Japanese Islands *Okinawa and Sakishima* in preparation for the invasion of Japan.

These Carriers had come under heavy attack by Japanese suicide Planes and several, including the *Victorious* had been damaged.

It was time to end its war and go home.

The Captain announced to his War-weary crew that they would be headed for Sydney to be repaired and they were overjoyed by his decision.

There were many celebrations as the ship sailed south for the men knew that they would have a warm welcome once they were safe in Sydney Harbour. They had been in Sydney and many of the men had formed close relationships with the local girls.

As *Victorious* tied up at Garden Island there were hundreds of girls waving and cheering and the men knew that the next few months would be very enjoyable indeed.

British Troops were always made welcome in Australia as most Australians still called England-HOME.

The refitting done , the *Victorious* sailed back to the war but the Atom Bomb was dropped and the War was over. So it was back to Sydney again. The crew were unhappy when they were not sent to Tokyo for the

surrender ceremony but were told that it was back home to Britain but first there was to be another stay in Sydney.

As they sailed into Sydney Harbour, every ship, big and small, sounded their sirens and fired flares. Planes flew overhead and dipped their wings as a salute to a brave ship.

The crew *Dressed Ship* and lined the decks and many a tear was shed because of the warm welcome. This was much better than being in Tokyo.

Captain John Annerley was popular with his crew and was even more popular when he announced that the *Victorious* had been ordered to return to Britain and was to carry a cargo of *War Brides of British Troops in Australia*.

As many of the crew had married Australian girls it looked like being a wonderful voyage.

At the end of the War, Australia had a population of 7.5 million and the marriage rate began to climb as the Troops came home after five years of War. Marriage and a home were the anchors in a troubled World in 1945 and many young Australian Troops wanted to be with the girls who had waited for them and start a new life in a World free from all Wars. It was a time when glossy magazines all had pictures of young, elegant wives in the arms of handsome young ex-servicemen in their uniforms and wearing their decorations.

It was a sign of security and a new, prosperous way of life.

We wanted to be part of it all.

The War had given women a new role in society as they had been welcomed into the workforce. In 1942, PM John Curtin said that women

should have wages equal to men. Women went to work and began to earn good money and many would put off marriage until the War was over.

Women joined the Armed Services, the Red Cross and the Land Army. They gave great support to our Troops and the War Effort.

Most young Australians matured during the War years but when it was over there was a desire to settle down, raise a family, build a home and enjoy the coming prosperity that they believed that they had earned.

The US and British Troops who had served in Australia found that they were always welcomed into Australian homes and meeting Australian girls was easy to do. It is estimated that 15,000 Australian women married US, Canadian and British Servicemen.

Their lives would be changed forever.

HMS Victorious lacked the usual comforts of a passenger liner so Captain Annerley called a staff meeting and drew up a plan to install bunks and bathrooms in the hangers under the Flight Decks. The plan was to provide for 500 women and children. There were to be staff to clean, prepare food and additional medical Doctors, Nurses and VAD'S.

The Captain had no idea about how a cargo of women and children would behave, He would soon learn.

It was announced that the refitting would be completed in May 1946 and the ship would set sail in June. Letters were sent to all War Brides saying that the Royal Navy would be paying all costs and that there would be free passage for all.

They were swamped with applications.

It was decided to increase the numbers to 700.

The hangers had dormitories of bunks with overhead fans . Toilets and laundries were built as well as recreational areas. There was a huge dining room and a room for ironing. Several ice cream machines and soda fountains were installed as well as many water bubblers.

A kiosk and shelters were built on the upper deck and the Red Cross supplied towels and bed linen.

As many women were pregnant, several midwives were added to the staff.

Women were allowed to take 225lb of luggage and some hand bags. There was only one class and all would have the same food.

The Captain announced that the *Victorious* would sail on the 3 July 1946 and call at Fremantle, Ceylon, the Suez . Gibraltar and finish at Plymouth.

Welfare Agencies would meet the ship at Plymouth and assist any woman who had no one there to meet her.

Sadly, this was the case for some .

HMS Victorious sailed from Sydney on the 3 July 1946 with 1,854 people aboard. There were 54 Officers, 813 Crew and 619 War Brides. There were VAD'S, Welfare Staff and Hospital staff.

As the ship moved into the Tropics it was found that more people were using the Flight Deck so all of the *Corsair Fighter planes* were pushed overboard.

The passengers cheered. The War was over.

LIFE AT SEA.

Berths were allocated as follows.

Pregnant women and those with medical certificates were given first priority .Age was given second priority.

There was one shower for every 25 women and one toilet for every 20 women. Extra toilets were built close to the dormitories for use in the nights.

A large laundry was provided in the main hanger and clothes lines were provided in the lift wells. There were good irons and boards available.

Committees were formed to arrange entertainment and a Welfare Committee was there to help women with any problems. A booklet with all information was given to every woman.

The main hanger was the Food Hall with 18 tables each seating 20 women . The food was rated as good but there was a problem with serving fresh fruit and salads in the tropics.

Appetites were enormous.

Many of the women suffered from sea sickness but there was a good supply of paper bags.

June Martin wrote;

We sailed and arrived at Gibraltar on the 3 August. We all went ashore and were able to buy fresh fruit from Spain. This was something that we would not see once we arrived in Britain.

Norma Dykes wrote;

I spent my 18th birthday at Gibraltar and climbed the Rock and bought some nice fruit. I am looking forward to leaving the ship when we get to Britain. I am tired of life on board.

The Victorious docked at Plymouth on the 6 August and the Lord Mayor of Plymouth and the Press were there to greet them

Elsie Willmott wrote;

Plymouth had been badly bombed and there was rubble everywhere. A special train had brought our husbands there and I started to think about what I would do if my husband was not there. Then I saw him and my girl friend Molly also saw her man.

We both felt so happy. I hardly recognised him in his civvy clothes. A lot different to his uniform.

I was so happy.

Heather Harris wrote;

Cliff was there to meet me. We got a train to London and met Cliff's brother and then on to meet Cliff's mum. I can see her now. We put our arms around each other and I gave her a big kiss. She was a bit shy at first but we got on all right.

It was not all plain sailing as some of the Brides changed their minds on the voyage. They just wanted to go back to Australia. Some husbands did not come to meet their Brides as they had had formed new relationships in Britain.

We now find distressed Women on the dockside wondering what to do next.

However there were many Social Welfare people there who would say;

Come with us and we will try to sort things out for you.

From Plymouth the War Brides fanned out across the UK to settle in cities, towns, villages and hamlets . They often had to share the homes

of their husband's parents. They found that life in the Country was much different to that in the big cities. Food was rationed and fresh fruit was a luxury. Most families were counting their dead and repairing the bomb damage to their homes and workplaces.

It all took time but most of the Brides were accepted and loved. Families were started and life would begin again after 6 years of war.

The winter of 1954 was one of the most severe on record and many Brides wished that they were back in Australia. Most had never seen snow before.

For many of the War Brides the decision to stay in Britain or to return to Australia was a difficult one. Looking from Britain, Australia had become a Nation with new prosperity and an economic boom with jobs for everybody and new houses on large blocks of land. Britain was slow to rebuild and food and jobs were scarce.

By 1947 Britain had started an assisted passage scheme and this was taken up by many British families seeking a better life.

Elaine Powell wrote;

We came back to Taree and found that all my friends had gone . I found it dull after living in London. I wanted to go back but my Dennis got a job building houses at double the wage he was getting in England. He soon had his own business and my Mum loved him.

He now had his own house, a boat, a good Club, his mates and he never wanted to go back to Britain.

There are many more stories about The War Brides but I will finish up with an article written by a Sydney journalist in the Bulletin on the 10th July 1946.

Sydney's most stirring show last week was the departure for England of HMS Victorious with 700 Australian War Brides of British ex-servicemen aboard. Hours before the ship sailed, the road outside the wharf was packed with relatives and friends.

Aboard the Carrier, the Brides made an animated display as they lined the Flight Deck. Many sat astride the guns, clustered in Turrets and peered from Portholes. Shouted messages were drowned out in the din.

Most of the Brides were very young.

Some of the crew arrived after the gangplanks had been lifted and were taken aboard in nets and cranes.

The Captain is Captain Annesley who holds the DSO and the Croix de Guerre.

As the mighty ship moved away and the many streamers snapped, there were many people singing The Maori Farewell, Waltzing Matilda and Bell Bottomed Trousers.

It was only then that many Brides started to weep.

(John Imrie, 27/5/2021)